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MY RISKY EXPERIMENT AND OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCE

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Near sunset on the day we moved back to the US from Laos, I heard the office's Land Cruiser chugging up the drive to take my wife and me to Wattay Airport. Before greeting the driver, I paused to gaze out at the Mekong River swirling just beyond the shadowy green of our backyard. The sun hung low over Thailand on the opposite shore as a mist rose from the river's brown waters. The nearby Buddhist temple, Wat Thana, absent its twilight drumming and chanting, stood silent. The world felt quiet and heavy.

Though still a few years away from retirement age, I longed to expand my life beyond the profession that had dominated the last 35 years. In my best moments, the idea of leaving my job felt like a bold self-affirming quest for personal growth. At other times, I feared it might be a reckless copout that could hurl me into ruin. The way out seemed strewn with hazards: financial risk, potential hardship for my family, and the loss of professional identity. The forecast for successfully starting over in my late fifties looked gloomy. I quit anyway.

Several months later, with my life lurching along in the States and my enthusiasm and self-confidence waning, I began to feel depleted and disoriented. Although I had planned to use intuition to guide my inner exploration, the stress from the overseas move, reverse culture shock, and the self-inflicted job shakeup had wrecked my internal compass. In contrast to my stimulating but high-pressure career in international aid and the challenges of living in a foreign country, the new routine felt stale and superficial. Rather than expand my life, I had apparently bungled things and shrunk it instead. Adrift in a fog, rudderless, and seeking to rekindle some inspiration for my risky experiment, I signed up for an out-of-body experience (OBE) intensive at the Monroe Institute. The course had intrigued me for years though I had never had the time for it. Now I had plenty – maybe too much time. My expectations for the intensive were modest. Having had spontaneous OBEs as a college student, but doubting my ability to initiate one deliberately, I had mainly hoped to deepen my knowledge about them.

During the weeks preceding the course, I followed the advice of the instructor, William Buhlman, to practice an OBE technique at home. Every night I carved out space at

bedtime, repeating his affirmation, "I remain aware as I fall asleep." Nothing happened initially, though the affirmation made it a little harder to get to sleep. Then after about a week, I felt a steady buzzing in my neck, which soon developed into strong rhythmic vibrations that pulsed upward from my toes to my head. I began to wake up in my dreams.

Although I had prepared myself to the extent possible, I struggled with the OBE-inducing exercises when the course finally began. Despite many serious attempts, I made no apparent progress. So after a day and a half of disappointment and frustration, I resigned myself to the prospect that I just could not do it. Once I relaxed and stopped trying, however, the exercises came alive.

During the very next session, I suddenly found myself flying at breakneck speed in a dense dark forest, winding through a maze of massive trees. Another time, I awoke perched on a billowy white cloud, high above the earth, wondering how I managed to get up there. Later that day, an ancient-looking Buddhist monk in a reddish-orange robe materialized out of the darkness. He questioned me about my spiritual growth, even though his lips never moved, and he appeared to be meditating. During this exchange, I spotted someone observing us, whom I later identified as Bob Monroe from a photo of him as a young man.

Whereas the OBEs I had faced as an undergraduate involved travels around my home and neighborhood, the sudden flurry of experiences at Monroe had so far transpired in a dark void or in faraway places. They were completely fantastical and brought to mind the hallucinogenic trips I had only read about. What's more, the unmistakable and dramatic feeling of stepping out of my body, characteristic at the onset of my earlier OBEs, had evolved into more subtle means for crossing into the nonphysical domain. My awareness now gradually penetrated new environments, slipped almost imperceptibly into a void, awoke somewhere else, or snapped instantly to locations near or far. Despite the gobsmacking strangeness, achieving the out-of-body state a handful of times enabled me to stitch together a makeshift mental roadmap to repeat the process.

With my confidence boosted and my approach somewhat clearer, the OBEs started to come more naturally and the long hauls into the unknown continued. Once while out of body, a brilliant speck of light appeared in the far distance. As I moved nearer, it became apparent that the glow emanated from a shimmering facsimile of a human eye suspended freely in the darkness. On close inspection, the eye proved gigantic, about three- or four-stories high, composed of an intricate latticework of thousands of smaller interlocking eyes. The great eye struck me as majestic – enormous and ingeniously crafted. Bracing myself for the plunge, I dove through its cavernous pupil to explore what lay beyond.

Following a late session with the instructors, a series of even more enigmatic events transpired. While comparing notes with another participant, I became lightheaded and overcome with *déjà vu*. Even though we had never spoken before, I felt certain that I

knew her. The sensation stayed with me as I lumbered back to my room in a haze to begin the day's final exercise. Once my awareness shifted away from the physical, to my astonishment, the person with whom I had just been chatting appeared hovering in front of me. She looked completely normal, except that she would disappear and then reappear rapidly as if flashing off and on. As the encounter unfolded, waves of emotion swept through me. The next morning we coincidentally sat together at breakfast and mutually verified the details of our extraordinary rendezvous.

On another occasion, having left my body and made my way downstairs, I discovered the institute's lounge jam-packed with people, who appeared to be celebrating. Meandering among the throng of astral partygoers, I searched unsuccessfully for someone from my class. Other times, though able to separate from my body, I missed the target of the exercise. Several of these entailed out-of-body meetups at the large Brazilian crystal on campus, which I consistently failed to reach, often landing, inexplicably, in the institute's kitchen. Twice, while on an excursion out of body, I saw one of the co-trainers. She had mentioned they would be watching out for us in other dimensions, but I had dismissed the idea at the time as preposterous. As the intensive progressed, I realized how limited my understanding of the out-of-body state, if not consciousness in general, had been.

In the course of one of the final exercises, the participant from my *déjà vu* episode came gliding toward me through the dark ether. As she drew closer, intense feelings of love and sadness surged in my heart. With the rush of emotions accelerating, I began to perceive a channel leading higher – an energetic opening of sorts. Without warning, I rocketed upward through layer after layer of lights of different hues and intensities. After I finally came to rest, all traces of my human existence had been erased. I had transformed entirely into a radiant white sphere tinged with an effervescent blue halo. Not only did I assume this new form, but I simultaneously witnessed it from a short distance away. A deep sense of self and indescribable ecstasy permeated my being. A nearly identical, though somewhat smaller glowing sphere, bobbed silently alongside me. Stunned by the events, I hung there in the soft light-filled stillness, striving to absorb what had happened and to take stock of my new surroundings – and then everything went blank.

Flung back into material reality, I discovered my heart pounding wildly, vibrations rippling through my flesh, and a buzz stirring in the base of my spine. Charged by the shock from my encounter with that purely energetic dimension, more journeys would come after I left the institute.

Just one year earlier, I had agonized over the potential consequences of quitting my job, including jeopardizing my career, livelihood, and the welfare of my family. Although I deeply valued my profession, I had reached a crossroads. With time becoming precious and having lost heart for the familiar path, I decided to take an offramp. Staring out over the darkening waters of the Mekong on my last day of service, I had questioned what the world had left for me. Life responded.